DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 099 920 CS 500 915

AUTHOR	McGuire, Sharon M.
TITLE	Obscenity: Its Use and Abuse.
INSTITUTION	Montana Speech Communication Association.
PUB DATE	73
NOTE	10p.; Montana Speech Communication Association is an affiliate of the Speech Communication Association
JOURNAL CIT	The Communicator; v4 n2 p6-13 Spring 1973
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Censorship; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Expressive Language; *Figurative Language; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS	*Obscenity; Profanity

ABSTRACT

Obscenity and profanity may be defined synonymously as making public that which is private through the use of words which society considers taboo. Obscenity can be classified in three general ways: religious profanity, excretory profanity, and sexual profanity (i.e., copulative terms, genitalia terms, and sexual irregularities). The purposes of obscenity are to create attention, discredit existing institutions and leadership, provoke response, identify and assert oneself, and provide catharsis. Three general principles determine the effects of these uses of obscenity: (1) who--the degree of shock is determined by the rhetorical agent (e.g., the longshoreman who is expected to use colorful language and the priest who is not); (2) where--the setting (e.g., the church or the locker room); and (3) how--the tone of voice and the text in which the word is used. Verbal obscenity is a significant rhetorical device, and it is time to help discover appropriate responses to it. (TS)

ED 099920

...ARTMENT OF HEALTH,
...ATION & WELFARE
...ONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE COMMUNICATOR

of the

Montana Speech Communication Association

Volume IV Spring 1973 Number 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial. 2

Report of the Spring MSCA Conference 3

A Personal Review. 4
William W. Wilmot

Obscenity: Its Use and Abuse. 6
Sharon M. McGuire

Let the Kiddeos Play with the Videos and Don't Punt When You're About to Make a Touchdown. 13
Robert J. Byers

Oral Interpretation in the Public Schools: An Approach for the Teacher 23
David M. Fisher

* *

Editors: Dave Fisher and Jim Polsin

Typist: Michelle Peterson

CS 500 915

OBSCENITY: ITS USE AND ABUSE

by
Sharon M. McGuire*

Introduction

The effort to define obscenity encounters two difficulties--one concerns precision and exactitude and the other concerns agreement or consensus. Obscenity cases in the courts concerning literature, magazines, movies, plays and entertainment have been involved for many years in definitions which can be universally applied. To consider obscenity as simply prurient (causing to have lascivious thoughts) is by way of defining one obscure word with another of little more meaning. Legally proving that one word or another appeals to prurient interests is virtually unsupportable, given the wide divergence of stimulus-arousal in man, and the consideration of redeeming literary merit or relevant social comment.

Chlor submits that more than just sexual appeal and sexual stimulation are involved in the definition of obscenity. What of the daily newspaper carrying, in prime position on the front page, the picture of the horribly mangled body of a child, or of Vietnamese headless corpses, or a lifeless Che Guavara? These of themselves are obscene. Our definition, then, must include the factors of violence, agony and death presented in horrifying manners. Reflecting these feelings are Black Power leaders such as Elderidge, Brown and Cleaver, who state, "We are not obscene: the war in Vietnam is obscene." Chomsky says, "The Vietnam War is an obscenity." Jerry Rubin, leader of the Yippie movement, comments, "Obscenities mark the hypocrisy of society."

Obscenity, then, consists of making public that which is private; it consists in an intrusion upon intimate physical processes and acts, or physical emotional states. In addition, it consists in a degradation of the human dimensions of life to a subhuman or merely physical level. Obscenity dehumanizes human purposes and human beings.

Profanity, which is the most common expression of the obscene, consists in the use of words society considers taboo. Bostrom and Rossiter consider the taboo as "cathexis context or mental energy attached to a concept in the individual's unconscious which represents an aggressive or destructive wish."

DeVito sees the use of profane words as being irrelevant for words of themselves are not things. If people simply used words as they thought of them, there would be no more taboos associated with words. There would be no profanities.

---

*Ms. McGuire is an instructor in the Business Education Department at the Grande Prairie Regional College, Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada.

Webster's Dictionary gives the meaning of obscenity as "to degrade or be indecent," while profanity is defined to mean, "unholy, or offensive to God." The connotation of these words has undergone a change, however, and in pop culture they are used interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider these terms as interchangeable.

Classification

The use of obscenity is metaphoric; that is, it refers to experiences of many men of many races which are lived anew by each generation. The effectiveness of this kind of metaphor is not due to its linguistic characteristics, but lies in its functional properties or mode of interaction. For instance, the agitator must use "the jagged word, the snarling word, the insulting word; he cannot clothe his ideas in euphemistic cotton wool to spare our sensibilities." The metaphor is not a decoration but a medium of knowing.

Bostrom and Rossiter note three classifications of obscenities:

1. Religious profanity
2. Excretory profanity
3. Sexual profanity

These are ranked in order of their corresponding effect on the listener, with religious profanity being the most acceptable and sexual profanity the least acceptable.

Rothwell sees this classification in a different manner. He considers damn, hell, and the like so common in usage as to not be obscenities. His classification omits religious expletives, and ranks the remaining obscenities in this manner:

1. Copulative terms
2. Excretory terms
3. Genitalia terms
4. Sexual irregularities

The words used in these ways are all considered obscene because of their negative connotations, which are generally either aggressive or destructive. Hall discovered that only eight percent of profane terms denoting coitus described it as a pleasurable activity, while the rest of the words for coitus had aggressive, manual or work contents.

Purposes

1. Create Attention

Obscenity is a way of life. Even those who condemn its use in public use it privately. Lenny Bruce, the late social satirist, attempted in his many law cases fighting obscenity

charges to call public attention to the prevalent use of profanity in most social conversations. In one case, Bruce's attorney caused the arresting officer to concede that terms Bruce used were frequently used among on-duty policemen within the station boundaries. The jury, however, felt that no matter how frequently these terms were in fact used, on the stage and before an audience they became unacceptable to prevailing social mores. Bruce claimed that his use of obscenity was simply a matter of shocking people into recognition of the prejudice and hypocrisy existing in most social situations. In fact, he presented a case for considering the word "coffee" obscene when used in situations like "Come up to my place for coffee."

Young people, whether on campus or in the community, are now using words their grandfathers would never have used in mixed company, and their grandmothers might never have known the full meaning of. This new freedom of speech reflects the growing emancipation of youth from Victorian sexual and moral behaviors. They believe in "doing their own thing" without pretense or sham in accordance with the need to be honest in all things, and the force of their own self-determination. When a word is found to be descriptive of a certain emotion or situation, then it should be used to its fullest extent, rather than choosing a euphemism less subject to traditional taboos.

Among people everywhere and in all walks of life, the use of the profane word is becoming more prevalent. Cameron reported that every fourteenth word in his sample was profanity of some type. In general, however, the more formal the situation, the less likelihood of the use of taboo words. The more informal the situation, the more the use of the vernacular creeps into speech.

Some individuals use obscene language to call attention to the paranoic difficulty they have in intrapersonalization and expression of sex. One manifestation of this is the obscene phone caller who expresses an obscene situation by simply breathing into the receiver. The bolder callers will sometimes loose a stream of obscenities at his unsuspecting listener. DeVito refers to this as a condition described as corpolalia where one derives sexual pleasure from using obscene language. He views this as quite harmless when it is mutually enjoyable to both partners (which may even be the case with the obscene phone call). Indeed, most normal love making transpires with the couple sharing their enjoyment verbally as well as physically. However, corpolaliacs are people who indulge in this activity to a degree that causes problems, either because there is extreme discomfort on the part of one partner, or when it is the only way an individual can achieve arousal. Sadomasochists, for example, find deep arousal from verbal abuse or from submitting others to verbal depravities.

In the public forum, attention is created through the use of shock rhetoric. Those using this device gain attention by

strong, passionate language whose connotations evoke an immediate emotional response from the listener--usually that of outrage. Recently these tactics have been used to great effect by protesters, power groups and the various types of liberationists. Notable instances have included the Kent State Crisis, where the verbal abuse was considered a direct cause of the confrontation, the riots at the National Democratic Convention in Chicago, which focused a great deal of attention away from the business of the convention and onto the anti-war demonstrations on the streets, and the Black Power movement, whose diatribes have forced a reaction from both the elite and the worker to the plight of Negroes in America. Often the verbal obscenities are combined with public sexual acts which serve as political-rhetorical metaphors signaling liberation from conventions even as they protest conventions. Rubin, a Yippie movement leader, explains this as ridiculing both traditional politics and the ideological politics of the Right and the New Left as mirror images of each other. Obscenity is the hallmark of ridicule. The purpose is to shock as the "more people you alienate, the more people you reach. If you don't alienate them, you aren't reaching them."

2. Discredit

Obscenities are used to discredit existing institutions and leadership. It is antithetical to the Establishment. As four-letter words are taboo, they express a profound contempt for society's standards, a revolt against authority, and an irreverence for things sacred.

Sometimes the discreditation method is used as a tool of teaching. Hypothetically, there exists a "credibility gap" between teachers and students which makes effective communication difficult. Students feel that if an idea cannot be presented in language that a reasonably attentive seventh-grader can understand, someone is jiving someone else. Usually this is done by pompous people who attempt to make people feel less worthy than they've a right to feel by people who use fancy titles. Postman and Weingartner accept this viewpoint and theorize that by "laying it on" the students, using open direct language, barriers between students and teachers can be broken down, enabling students to be able to want to understand that which they need to know. For instance, in their student handbook, they describe "Varieties of Bullshit and How to Deal with Them" in this manner:

1. One man's bullshit is another man's catechism.
2. At any given time the chief source of bullshit with which you will have to contend is yourself.
3. Almost nothing is about what you think it's about.
4. Far and away the most prolific sources of bullshit, after yourself, are idealists.

Agitators use obscenity as a symbol of rebellion against the power structure, taking great pride in telling it exactly as it is. In this way, they violate all the formal behaviors that society has come to expect of people engaged in public acts.

3. To Provoke

Campus protesters provoke through obscenity. Intense verbal aggression has been found to be the most effective rhetorical method for inciting violence. Protesters hurl invectives at the police in an effort to evoke retaliation. A barrage of obscenities issuing from the mouths of bearded youths and demure young ladies alike, throw the essentially middle-class American police into a cultural shock. Should they react to this abuse, the point the protesters make that police are indeed pigs is then proved. With their senses being thus assaulted, the police, in turn, see the agitators as non-human; therefore, as they are non-human they can be attacked as rattlesnakes. The intense moral repugnance to obscenity causes gross distortion to the observation of human behavior and results in an escalation of the confrontation.

4. Identification

The rhetoric of the Black Panthers articulates what Black Americans feel. For generations, Black ghetto dwellers have engaged in a game called "dozens" or "sounding." This game starts with one participant offering a simple curse, which elicits a response with an added expletive. Should the participants tactically agree to continue the game, one's sexual prowess provides the focus and one's imagination is the only limit on the story line. In advanced games, the obscenities exchanged are couched in verse.

The purpose of this game is essentially self-assertive. By humiliating his opponent, Black youth establishes a place within the community and a reputation among other Blacks. Youths prepare themselves for the hypermasculine world of the gang by putting down women, asserting their own masculinity, and defending themselves against incest, homosexuality, and other deviant behavior. This rhetorical ability is highly valued among Blacks. The status of the "dozens" player is greatly diminished if he has to resort to fighting as an answer to a verbal attack. Obscenity is helpful in goading an opponent into blowing his cool. So highly regarded is facility in this game among Blacks that the nickname "Rap" was given to Black Panther leader H. Rap Brown to honor his agility at the game.

5. Provide Catharsis

The highly emotional nature of obscenity generates a purgative feeling within the individual who employs such language when delivered with its customary gusto and vitality.

Automobile drivers in the extension of self which is the privacy of their own cars, often direct streams of verbal abuse at other drivers, thus overcoming their frustrations at traffic in general and the inadequacies of his fellow human beings in particular. Anyone who has ever hit his thumb with a hammer knows well the only realistic expression of his frustration and pain.

The ghetto dweller uses the "dozens" game as a safety valve or a surrogate for physical aggression. Living conditions become so oppressive and the need for self-realization becomes so great when confined within a world that barely tolerates Blacks and makes little effort to understand them; this expression of their selves, and their ability to handle the verbal situation, releases to some degree pent-up frustrations.

The frequency of the obscene terms and its almost casual use reduce the cathartic effect of a normally evocative word. As formerly taboo words creep into everyday language, movies, T.V., magazines and other easily available media, reinforced by the prevalence of pornography, the obscenity tends to lose its objective sense.

Effects

There are some general principles, outlined by Rothwell, which alter the affects of obscenity on the listener.

1. Who: The degree of shock is determined by the rhetorical agent; e.g., the longshoreman who is expected to use colorful language, and the priest who is expected to be very circumspect.

2. Where: Very little in the way of profanity is generally heard in a religious or church setting. However, conversation in the locker room after a crucial game has been lost may loose a tide of profanity reflecting the high emotions and the strong male atmosphere.

3. How: In some instances an obscenity can mostly be determined in the context in which the word is used, rather than in the word itself. For example, the term "bastard" can arouse resentment and invite reprisal in some situations. Yet, used with another tone of voice and in another situation it can denote affection and admiration.

Conclusion

The use of obscenities are becoming more common in everyday speech and less socially taboo than they have been in the

past. There remains a whole unwritten mythology concerning the use and abuse of such words which will likely remain in effect for some time to come. However, the drives to avoid sham and pretence make the likelihood that certain profanities now considered barely tolerable will pass into common usage such as yesteryear's "darn" and "jeez" have. The question remaining is, "Will a new code system of forbidden words arise to take their place and fill the need for a separate set of words to describe man's basic revolt against constriction and recognition of his deeper bodily needs?" Only time will tell.

Obscenity as used by the agitator results in social disapproval which tends to cloud issues and elicit aggressive responses. The spiral response of anger-stimulus and anger-reaction as seen at the Chicago National Democratic Convention, when police countered obscenity with the use of more obscenity, resulted in the eruption of violence. Few remain apathetic, but are forced into a polarization pattern from which withdrawal is difficult. As Michener noted:

> Worse in a way than the missles at Kent State were the epithets. A steady barrage of verbal filth, curses and fatal challenges came down upon the Guard, whose masks did not prevent them from hearing what they were being called.

Perhaps it is time to accept verbal obscenity as a significant rhetorical device and help discover appropriate responses to it.

Bibliography

1. Abel, Lionel, "The Position of Norm Chomsky," Commentary, Vol. 7, May 1969.

2. Abrahams, Roger D., Down Deep in the Jungle, Hatboro, PA, 1964.

3. Bostrom, Robert N. and Charles A. Rossiter, "The Effects of Three Types of Profane Language on Persuasive Messages." An unpublished manuscript.

4. Bruce, Lenny, How to Talk Dirty and Influence People, Playboy Press, 1966.

5. Chlor, Harry M., Obscenity and Public Morality, University of Chicago Press, 1969.

6. DeVito, Joseph M. "Why Dirty Words are Exciting," Sexology, April, 1971.

7. McEdwards, Mary G., "Agitative Rhetoric: Its Nature and Effect," Western Speech, Vol. 32, 1968.

8. Michener, James A., "Kent State: What Happened and Why," Reader's Digest, April, 1971.

9. Montagu, Ashley, The Anatomy of Swearing, New York, 1971.

10. Osborne, Michael M., "The Evolution of the Story of Metaphor in Rhetoric," Western Speech, Vol. 31, 1967.

11. Postman, Neil and Weingartner, Charles, The Soft Revolution, Delacorte Press, New York, 1971.

12. Rothwell, Dan J., "Verbal Obscenity: Time for Second Thoughts," Western Speech, Vol. 35, 1971.

13. Rubin, Jerry, Do It!, Dell Publishing, 1970.

14. Windt, Theodore Otto, "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," Journal of Speech, February, 1972.

15. Webster's Dictionary.

10